

## **Open letter to UK Education Ministry Heads Wider Opening of Schools in 2021**

**For The Attention of:**

**Gavin Williamson MP, Secretary of State for Education**

**Peter Weir MLA, Minister for Education, Northern Ireland Assembly**

**John Swinney MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, Scottish Parliament**

**Kirsty Williams MS, Minister for Education, Welsh Parliament**

It is essential that the UK achieves effective suppression of Covid-19, and the safe reopening of schools plays an essential part in this. A further spike in infections following the current lockdown would pose a range of unacceptable risks, including:

- the proliferation of further variants, which threaten our reliance on current vaccines as a pathway out of the Covid crisis
- compounding the already abhorrent UK death toll, presently standing at around 114,000
- increased numbers of Long-Covid sufferers, whose condition is poorly understood and may yet prove to cause permanent disability
- further prolonged lockdowns, harsh restrictions, economic decline, psychological damage, and harm to the education and well-being of children

The previous full reopening of schools in September contributed significantly to the current wave. Government data indicates that, when schools were fully open, school-aged children were twice as likely as the general population to be the index case within a household, with secondary school-aged students being 7 times more likely to be the index case.

Schools implemented government safety guidelines to the best of their ability, with no additional funding to achieve this. Sadly, the extent of cross-household in-school transmission demonstrated the inadequacy of the measures which were in place. The worthy objective of returning children to a stable and beneficial school environment was greatly disrupted; a direct result of the chaotic situation into which our education system was thrust. The great uncertainty this precipitated for exam year students persists even now, and children of all ages were concerned that they would bring the virus home to their loved ones.

Families with Clinical Vulnerabilities could not reasonably have been expected to send their child to school, yet were refused home learning support, including once systems to provide such support to self isolating students were in place. A considerable number of families who provided medical evidence to support their case for keeping their child at home had that evidence refused, and were subjected to coercive attempts to force attendance - fines, threats of prosecution and attempts to remove the child from the school-roll. Not only has this approach caused families undue stress at an extremely difficult time, it has destroyed relationships with schools which once played a pivotal role in these families lives.

Throughout the pandemic, schools and local authorities have rightly retained powers to compel attendance where they have reason to believe this to be in the best interests of the child. This should not prevent the majority of families - who do not pose any safeguarding risk to their child and may feel that they are coping well at home - having the opportunity to choose whether they wish to expose their child to the risks of a populated

environment during a pandemic. This is particularly the case given the emergence of the more transmissible B.1.1.7 variant, and other variants which may yet prove to be vaccine resistant. Of additional concern is the Office for National Statistics finding that 13-15% of children continue to experience symptoms 5 weeks after receiving a positive Covid-19 test, especially given current lack of support or treatment for children living with debilitating long-covid symptoms.

We must prioritise the health, wellbeing and education of our children and young people, whose experience of this pandemic during their formative years will undoubtedly have lifelong implications. By necessity, the forthcoming full reopening of schools must be different.

It is essential that the government:

- take a tiered approach, similar to that employed in Norway. Schools should be opened on the basis of local infection rates - not on a predefined and politically desirable date
- apply effective mitigation measures within schools, on the basis of risk within Local Authority areas, as indicated by a Traffic Light System
  - Red - 100 - 50 cases per 100,000 of the population
  - Amber - 50-10 cases per 100,000 of the population
  - Green - 0-10 cases per 100,000 of the population
- mitigate risk in high infection rate areas with smaller class sizes to reduce contacts, and the risk of airborne transmission. This could be achieved by the use of rotas, or by hiring more spaces and more mental-health and education staff. These staff would also assist with vital emotional and social recovery, a prerequisite for a successful balanced catch-up curriculum.
- acknowledge airborne transmission as a significant route of transmission of Covid-19, and provide school-specific guidance and funding for mitigation, which must be drawn up in consultation with aerosol science specialists and building ventilation consultants. Mitigations likely to be suggested include reduced class sizes, increased mask use, installation of ventilation systems or the use of portable HEPA filters, and CO<sup>2</sup> monitoring
- continue to dis-apply section 444 of the Education Act and ensure that a comprehensive, fully resourced online learning program is available to every family who wish to continue supporting their child's learning from home
- close the digital divide by providing laptops and broadband to children who need them to support learning from home - whether or not this is by choice

Our nation's sacrifice to suppress the most recent peak must not be squandered, and nor can it be repeated. We owe it to the children of our country to provide safe spaces to learn, and a safe country to grow up in and inherit.

Yours, in sincere hope,

## **Parents United UK**

Campaign for a Sensible, Safe and Sustainable approach to education during the pandemic

And

## **Clinicians**

- Dr Matthew Butler, MBBS BSc(Hons) MRCP (UK, Ger) PGCert(Health Res), Consultant Physician
- Dr Tom Lawton MBE, Critical Care Consultant
- Dr Sally Morgan, Director, Association of Clinical Psychologists UK
- Dr Alison George - GP & Honorary GP in Emergency Medicine
- Lindsay Fraser-Moodie MBChB| BSc (Hons) | DCH | PgCert (Global Health & Infectious Diseases) GP Registrar

## **Academics and Experts**

- Prof. Jose-Luis Jimenez, University of Colorado, USA - Prof. Chemistry, CIRES, Univ. Colorado. Highly Cited (h=125), Fellow AAAR & AGU. Aerosols, air poll., MS. <http://tinyurl.com/faqs-aerosol> & <http://tinyurl.com/covid-estimator>
- Prof Jacqui Hamilton, Professor of Atmospheric Chemistry, University of York
- Dr Jonathan Taylor, Research Associate in Aerosol Science, University of Manchester
- Dr. Deepti Gurdasani MBBS MD MPhil PhD, Senior Lecturer in Machine Learning at Queen Mary University of London
- Dr Sarah Dean Rasmussen, EPSRC Fellow in Mathematics, University of Cambridge
- Irene Gorosito, Graduate Student at Institute of Ecology, Genetics and Evolution of Buenos Aires, National Council for Scientific and Technical Research
- Professor Elspeth Webb, Department of Child Health, Cardiff University (retired)
- Dr Lucy Wenham, Lecturer in Education, University of Bristol
- Ruth Swailles, School Improvement Adviser and Educational Consultant, Assure Education
- Dr. Julian Hough, Lecturer in Computer Science and Health and Safety Representative, Queen Mary University of London
- Alyson Gilbert-Smith MSc BSc Lic. RTPI, Planning Consultant
- Dr Archit Mehra, Postdoctoral Researcher in Indoor Air at The University of Chester
- Michelle Wong, BArch, Architectural Designer

## **Political Figures**

- Baroness Masham of Ilton
- Vix Lowthion - Education Spokesperson for the Green Party
- Councillor Jumbo Chan, Brent
- Cllr Lorcan Whitehead, Colchester Borough Council
- Cllr Ian Watkinson, South Ribble Borough Council
- Mish Rahman, Labour National Executive Committee

## **Campaigners**

- Sammie McFarland, founder of Long Covid Kids
- Hear The Student - safety campaign by students, for students - calling for safety in all educational settings
- Mark McDonald, Human Rights Barrister
- Bernice Figa and Stacey McCann, Admins One voice: supporting vulnerable adults and children during Covid
- Zero Covid UK
- Safe Ed For All

- David Lawrence, Contamination Concerns During Covid-19
- Andrea Gilbert, BAME Officer, IWW Union
- FreshAirNHS
- [www.covid19ppe.org](http://www.covid19ppe.org)
- George David, UKAT UK Action Team
- Kirstie Paton NEU Executive
- J Bee, Union Representative, Unison
- Janet Newsham, Hazards Campaign

### **Public Figures**

- Dominic Minghella, Producer and Screenwriter

### **Student - Further or Higher Education**

Name Redacted

### **Student - School or Sixth Form**

Name Redacted

### **Charity and Community Representatives**

- Revd Joseph Haward
- John Wallace - Chair: NLRP12, Advisor: Autoinflammatory UK, Member: Covid19 Global Rheumatology Alliance Patient Board

### **Education Workers**

L C Roberts BA Hons	Sonia Millington	Sarah Chalke	Melanie Stroud	Alison Hayes
Wendy Morris	Madeleine Revell	Laura Baxter	Anthony Seaton	Wendy Morris

### **Grandparents**

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**Name Redacted**

**Parents and Carers**

Over 600 so far

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